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Illicit Drug Labs Running Low on Chemicals

Authorities Kept 60 Major Chemical Shipments Out of Illicit Channels

VIENNA, 23 February 1999 (UN Information Service) -- The number of chemical shipments that authorities have stopped before they could reach illicit drug traffickers has multiplied by a staggering amount over the past few years, according to this year's report of the International Narcotics Control Board (INCB).

Shipments of precursors -- chemicals which traffickers need to make illicit drugs -- prevented from being diverted into illicit hands by authorities grew from three cases reported to the Board in 1994 to about 60 in 1997, as governments joined forces to discover an increasing number of methods and routes traffickers use to obtain and transport these substances.

Some 141 tonnes of the precursors ephedrine and pseudoephedrine, either of which is used to make methamphetamine, were prevented from diversion in 1997 alone, out of a total 200 tonnes kept out of trafficking channels since 1994. Traffickers continue to divert ephedrine, but are reportedly short of the chemical in, for instance, South East Asia and North America.

A total of over 4,000 tonnes of methyl ethyl ketone, acetone and toluene, solvents which would have been used for about 250 tonnes of cocaine, have been prevented from reaching illicit routes since 1994. Some 84 tonnes of P2P (1-phenyl-2-propanone), enough for about 40 tonnes of amphetamines, and MDP-2-P (3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone), which would make 25 tonnes of MDMA or "ecstasy", were also stopped en route to traffickers during this time.

Ten years ago, it was generally considered impossible to control these chemicals as effectively as they now are. An increasing number of national authorities now prevent the diversion even of common chemicals with many legitimate uses that are traded in large quantities.

In about 40 per cent of known cases, authorities have prevented diversion of these chemicals by checking transactions through the Board before shipment. Governments of exporting countries regularly send pre-export notices for treaty substances to governments of importing nations or the INCB, which have prevented many diversions, and industry has also alerted the authorities to several suspicious chemical orders.

A rapidly growing number of national authorities are now systematically checking whether orders are legitimate before shipment or exchanging information on suspicious cases. The attached diagram shows communication links between exporting/importing countries, industry, the INCB and relevant international organizations such as the International Criminal Police Organization (Interpol) and the World Customs Organization (WCO).

Tighter Control over Key Chemicals

Governments agreed when they drew up the 1988 drug control treaty that certain key chemicals needed to make and process heroin, cocaine and synthetic drugs, such as stimulants, should be internationally controlled.

Now, ten years after the 1988 treaty entered into force, governments have recognized that tight controls can even be applied to common industrial chemicals, such as potassium permanganate and acetic anhydride, crucial for cocaine- and heroin-making, respectively.

Some 112 tonnes of potassium permanganate, a common industrial chemical critical for cocaine-making, were seized in the Americas in 1997 -- the largest amount of that chemical ever discovered in the region and more than has been found in the last four years combined.

Increasing amounts of acetic anhydride have been seized in Asia over the past year, including 16 tonnes in transit from China to Afghanistan discovered by the Uzbek authorities and 10 tonnes in Pakistan that had come from Germany.

To boost discovery of the attempted diversions of these chemicals, the international community agreed at the General Assembly's special session in 1998 to provide pre-export notices, at the request of the importing country, for potassium permanganate and also for acetic anhydrate.

The Board urges all governments to quickly set up controls for common chemicals, particularly acetic anhydride and potassium permanganate, since information from seizures shows that traffickers are avoiding countries with strong controls by changing their routes to illicit laboratories.

Closing Loopholes for Non-Controlled Chemicals

In response to tighter controls, traffickers have found new ways of processing drugs with chemicals not yet monitored by the 1988 Convention. And they have made so-called controlled drug analogues, which often require chemicals outside international control, according to the report.

To aid authorities, the Board set up last year a special surveillance list of substances not listed in the 1988 drug treaty, along with a set of proposed monitoring measures, as requested by the Economic and Social Council in 1996. This should mean more flexible control and rapid response to emerging trends, the INCB says.

The Board reports that some 148 countries and the European Union have become parties to the 1988 drug control treaty and an increasing number of governments are combating traffickers. Most of the major manufacturing, exporting and importing countries are parties to the 1988 treaty and some non-parties, such as South Africa and Switzerland, are taking concrete steps to control illicit drugs in line with the treaty.

The 1988 Global Drug Treaty

Precursors and essential chemicals used to make illicit drugs are controlled under the 1988 UN Convention against Illicit Traffic in Narcotic Drugs and Psychotropic Substances. The INCB monitors countries' compliance with the treaty and assists governments to identify suspicious transactions and take appropriate action.

Common Drugs and the Chemicals Needed to Make Them

Heroin: a narcotic analgesic derived from the opium poppy (*Papaver somniferum*). It is made by reacting morphine, extracted from opium, with acetic anhydride. The street product is most often found as a white, off-white or light brown powder.

Acetic anhydride is a chemical manufactured licitly throughout the world, with a variety of legitimate uses, including the manufacture of pharmaceuticals and plastics.

Cocaine: a potent stimulant. It is frequently an odourless, white, crystalline powder that is generally sniffed and absorbed through the mucous membrane of the nose. "Crack" is another form of cocaine prepared specifically for smoking. Cocaine is extracted from the coca leaf and then purified, using solvents such as acetone and methyl ethyl ketone.

Acetone is a common solvent used to clean, for example, paintbrushes, and in nail varnish remover.
Methyl ethyl ketone is a solvent used in the production of, such common products as adhesives and inks.
Potassium permanganate is widely used as a water purifier, disinfectant and bleaching agent.

"Ice" (or "shabu"): is powdered methamphetamine hydrochloride (the most common form of the drug) converted into large crystals. It is a powerful stimulant. Abuse of ice is particularly widespread in Asia. In North America and Europe, methamphetamine is generally abused as a nasally ingested powder ("crystal" or "meth") or in tablet form ("speed"). It is manufactured illicitly using ephedrine or pseudoephedrine as starting materials. The related psychotropic substance amphetamine, widely abused in Europe, is manufactured illicitly using 1-phenyl-2-propanone (P-2-P).

Ephedrine is either manufactured synthetically or derived from ephedra, a plant which grows wild in many parts of the world. It is an ingredient in many cough medicines.
Pseudoephedrine is widely available in over-the-counter nasal decongestants.
1-Phenyl-2-propanone is used in the pharmaceutical industry for the licit synthesis of amphetamine, methamphetamine and some of their derivatives.

Ecstasy: is the name associated with a number of illicitly manufactured drugs related to 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine (MDMA), a derivative of amphetamine. Ecstasy is manufactured illicitly using one of a related series of starting materials, such as safrole, isosafrole, 3,4-methylenedioxyphenyl-2-propanone (MDP-2-P) and piperonal.

MDP-2-P is used to make perfume components and in the flavouring industry.

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